

SPHERO WHITEPAPER

# 11 REASONS WHY

# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

# IS CRITICAL FOR TEACHERS

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## Introduction

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**As every teacher knows, education is a lifelong process.** It's true for students, who are learning and growing every day, but it's also important for teachers themselves. Professional development for educators is vital to success in the classroom. Whether it is courses dealing with curriculum standards, new curricula like STEM, timely topics like closing the achievement gap, understanding the effects of poverty on children or a host of others, **it's the opportunity for teachers to develop their own skills and abilities so they can, in turn, foster growth in their students.**

In this whitepaper, we'll look at professional development for teachers, why it matters, how it benefits not only teachers but their students, and how to discern you're getting the best educational opportunities for your efforts.



## Professional Development for teachers:

# Why it matters

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**“My higher education degree didn’t prepare me for life in the classroom,”** says Jeremy Macdonald, a former fifth grade teacher who is now senior manager of education content and professional learning at Sphero. “Teaching means understanding, but no teacher goes into their classroom knowing or understanding everything. That’s why professional development is critical.”

Learning never stops, even when you’re the one imparting that learning to a classroom of students. In fact, **for teachers, their own learning and skills development is a vital part of their profession.**



**“Learning is a lifelong practice for educators. The more we are willing to grow, the more effective we will be for our students. Teachers model these practices when they come back to the classroom excited to share what they learned. The excitement over learning a new skill is contagious and helps build confidence. Showing students that you are a work in progress and are willing to try new things, will foster a growth mindset in them as well.”**

- Laurie Guyon, Coordinator for Model Schools and Sphero Hero.

**The type of professional development for teachers may depend on the grade they teach.** For teachers in **elementary schools**, the vast majority receive general training on topics such as how to engage students, lifestyle topics like dealing with poverty in under-served neighborhoods, and other subject areas designed to enhance the total classroom experience. **In higher grades**, professional development is focused on content areas and honing expertise with new information, up-to-the-minute changes and timely issues.

At its core, professional development is about teachers staying fresh, current, and on top of their game so they can **deliver the best classroom experience possible for their students.**

**Here are some reasons professional development is so critical for teachers.**

# 11 Outcomes of Professional Development for Teachers

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## Honing professional skills

Like any professional in any industry who takes professional development courses, it's about the profession itself. For teachers, that means **keeping up with the newest research and practices** for better classroom outcomes. Professional development also provides opportunities for **sharing ideas and strategies** with colleagues to get fresh and different perspectives, in addition to finding new avenues and modes of thinking and reasoning, like **STEM education/practices**, with which educators can enrich the classroom experience for their students.

## Better outcomes for students

According to the [U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences](#), when teachers participate in robust, well-designed professional development programs, **achievement for their students can improve by as much as 21 percentile points**. Isn't that the end goal of going into this profession in the first place – shaping young minds, preparing them for higher learning, and imparting knowledge? For this reason alone, professional development is a no-brainer.



## Opportunities for professional networking

Although you work in a building filled with colleagues around you, teaching can oftentimes feel like a solitary profession – just you and your class. Conferences, in-person courses, and even online courses or [webinars](#) give teachers opportunities to meet other teachers. **The perspectives of teachers who work beyond your brick-and-mortar four walls can be a catalyst for change in your own classroom**. It's a powerful opportunity to create a larger community and get insights and see innovation and ideas from your peers.





## Different (sometimes better) ways to teach

Going hand in hand with networking, if you've been in front of a classroom for a number of years, you might benefit from a jolt of new ideas designed to help you better reach your students. **What worked for kids 10, or even five years ago, might not be effective now.** In professional development courses, teachers can explore new strategies, styles, and perspectives — whether it's more impactful ways to lecture or tactics to make lessons come to life. **Being able to share best practices and ideas gives you valuable insights on new ways to shake up your day-to-day.**

## Take the mystery and intimidation out of bringing new subjects into the classroom

Our society itself is changing at lightning speed, mostly as a result of technology. Just five years ago, few people were depositing checks into their bank accounts from their smartphones. Today, who goes to the branch anymore? Depending on the grade you teach, **your students are or may be digital natives**, never knowing life without an app for everything they or their parents do. It's vital that you **stay on top of trends and technologies** through professional development and bring them into your classroom to enhance your students' learning. STEM (or STEAM) is one example. STEM is an acronym we all know, but as little as a decade ago, it was brand new. **If teachers haven't been well versed in STEM, it can seem like it's all about robots and high technology. It's not.**





## Teachers can learn new ways to approach teaching from STEM

There's a **STEM mindset** that's important for engineers and scientists, but it goes beyond those STEM-specific fields. **The STEM mindset can translate to every subject in the classroom.**

It starts with a growth mindset, the idea that learning and growing are happening all the time. And it flows into curiosity, asking questions and wondering. It's using a scientific approach to answer those questions about whatever the subject may be – **history, literature, geography, social issues** – you name it. Part of STEM professional development is getting teachers to ask those questions and encourage their students to do the same.

It's vital now for teachers to learn these new modalities because learning itself is changing. In years past, it was important to be able to memorize lists of things. Today, all of that **information is at the ready on the Internet, and students need to learn how to access it, think critically about it and put it to use.** That's a fundamental shift in learning that STEM courses can help teachers address.

And it's not just about science. These modalities and ways of thinking can help students approach other subjects in new ways. Not just learning the facts and figures of history, but asking why things happened as they did, whether other approaches might have brought about different outcomes and how that knowledge can be put to use in the future. **It takes a subject off of the page and brings it to life in a whole new way.**

## More equity in the classroom

This is especially true in math and science. Many professional development courses offer ways to **include and interest under-represented groups of students, like girls and people of color, in STEM**, subjects that have long been considered and seen as male-centric and not as inclusive or diverse. **One key is starting in the early grades**, making math and science accessible and built into fun parts of the day.

## Learning in and of itself

Professional development is also about the very act of learning, **keeping one's mind bubbling and sharp, and gaining an understanding of new and important subjects**. Learning helps teachers become better teachers. Also, when teachers are engaging in professional development, they are modeling lifelong learning for their students.

## More empathy for students

This is a multifaceted benefit. The courses themselves can give teachers empathy for students if they are focused on subjects that deal with student lifestyle issues, today's classroom issues, and up-to-the-minute topics like safety and security. **But simply the opportunity to step away from the chalkboard, take off their teacher hat and become a student again gives teachers a new level of empathy for what their students are going through every day.**

## Empathy for student life outside the classroom

Many professional development courses go **beyond the classroom and into topics that cover student life**, which, as every teacher knows, becomes part of the job at one time or another. Whether it's ways to deal with **cyberbullying, gender issues, or a student's home life** that may be affecting his or her class performance, or current issues like dealing with the **isolation of distance learning or racial inequality**, these are topics you probably didn't cover while getting your teaching degree.

## It's a break from the classroom

The education profession can be difficult and even burdensome because it's so all-encompassing. Today's teachers wear many hats, from budgeter-in-chief to counselor to referee to educator. **Taking professional development courses brings a teacher's love of the profession to its roots: learning**. It's a chance to get out of the classroom and focus on ways to improve.



Getting the best out of professional development courses:

# Hallmarks of quality programming

**There are myriad courses and programs out there for professional development for educators. But not all are created equal. Here are some ways to discern which programs, courses and conferences are worth devoting your time to.**

## Opportunities for ongoing, sustained development

Courses shouldn't be just one and done. Even if it's a single course, there should be opportunities to continue developing those skills. For example, a live or virtual one-day course may offer **months of online follow-up, interaction with other students, and further study** in order to add a robust level of learning to the course. It may also provide **resources for implementing and sustaining** these skills in the classroom thereafter.

## Focus

There's an expression: don't drink from a fire hose when you can sip from a fountain. **The best professional development courses are focused, targeted and honed in on outcomes, competencies and results.**

## Commitment to learning

Not only do the courses need to provide follow-up and continuing development, **teachers themselves must commit to the process** of professional development for it to be worthwhile. The numbers from the Department of Education about the boost in students' achievement and test scores are dependent on the hours teachers spend on professional development. So the more time teachers devote to their own development translates to better and better outcomes for their students. **Taking one course each year is not going to have the intended effect.**







## Flexibility

Teachers don't have a lot of extra time on their hands during the school year. Going to a classroom session or a conference requires in-person attendance and a commitment of time. **But online courses should be flexible so teachers can learn on their own time.** It's important to seek out courses that offer anytime, anywhere learning, like [webinars](#) or [self-paced online modules](#).

## ROI

Time is the most precious commodity in a classroom, budget is the second. Showing the return on investment for teachers taking continuing education and professional development courses is vital. That means proof that teachers actively participated in the course and brought back what they learned into the classroom. **It's also important that the topics covered are applicable to a teacher's subject area of focus**, and the ask of the professional development is reasonable and attainable.

## Goal alignment

The best fit with a professional development course is one that aligns with the goals of a teacher, school and/or district. It will focus on **developing competencies that can be translated into classroom benefit and is clear on how goals are aligned** to show why this type of professional development matters.



## Conclusion

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Learning is what teaching is all about, and **taking regular professional development courses will only benefit student outcomes, and so much more.** It's an opportunity to network outside of a teacher's brick-and-mortar four walls, gain new perspectives, stay current on timely topics, hone their skills and get proficient at technology-based subjects like STEM in order to integrate them into the classroom. **After all, student life outside of the classroom is permeated with technology. It should be part of the classroom experience as well.**

At Sphero, we're dedicated to helping teachers bring STEM into their classrooms. For more information about the [professional development courses](#) and [webinars](#) we offer, please get in touch today.